

# Collecting Historical Narratives of Five Village Women in Namibia

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# Old Location Massacre, 10 Dec 1959



# Introduction

- Five village women involved in the liberation struggle in Namibia
- How they were identified
- Challenges of interviewing and authentication
- Writing a Book “Tears of Courage”
- The outcome

# Northern Namibia

- The background
- The war situation
- The dilemma of civilians in a guerrilla war

# Historical Prejudices

- Personal motivation
- Skewed perceptions
- A learning process

# Discovering the women

- Accidental discovery
- Snowball effect
- The common denominator



# Finding the stories

- A long process leading from one women's story to the next
- From Priskila
- to Drothea
- to Justina
- to Lahja
- to Aili



# Discovering Gender Bias

- The women were never mentioned in history
- Women portrayed as nameless victims of political conflicts or faceless wives, mothers, child bearers
- Reality was very different

# Authenticity and Earning the Trust...

- Finding independent sources
- Challenges of tracing people
- Authenticating and correlating archival sources

# Authenticity and Earning the Trust...

- Selective memory and forgetting
- Prompting the memory unearths further detail
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# Authenticity and Earning the Trust ...

- Networking and accidental traces
- Overcoming reluctance and gaining trust

# Authenticity and Earning the Trust

- Following further leads
- Tracking supporting evidence can be difficult



# Terrorist trial witness has kid

From Peter Kekana

**PRETORIA.**— A 32-year-old married African Ovambo woman from South West Africa, who is a witness in the terrorist trial in Pretoria, gave birth to a 6lb. 14½oz. baby boy at the Holy Cross Maternity Hospital on Monday morning.

Mrs. Justina Hanock is among the 30 Africans flown in from South West Africa to be witnesses in the trial of the 37 alleged terrorists.

She and the other witnesses are being kept in protective custody at the expense of the Government.

Mrs. Hanock's baby boy was still unnamed yesterday afternoon.

The baby is said to be in good health.

The presence of the woman in the hospital posed a problem to the nurses and hospital authorities.

Mrs. Hanock only speaks Ovambo and knows very little or no Afrikaans.

Communication with her is thus difficult.

The nursing sisters have attempted to speak to her in German, which the Africans in South West Africa know, but she did not seem to understand it either.

Terrorist trial witness Mrs. Justina Hanock and the newly-born baby at the Holy Cross Maternity Hospital.

# Authenticity and Earning the Trust

- Never ignore stories that are passed on through the words of a mouth
- But use scholarly methods to investigate their integrity and research deeper
- With each piece of evidence leading to the next

# Methods for Collecting these Stories

- Accidental discovery
- Unstructured open discussion
- Recording and learning
- Followed by systematic enquiry



# Methods for Collecting these Stories

- Opening up to sensitive issues
- Do not embarrass interviewees
- Feedback
- Positive outcomes

# Authenticity

- Pitfalls of oral histories of violent conflicts.
- Post-conflict re-styling of individual histories

# Research Outcome

- Oral history as a healing process?

# Research outcomes

- Historical narratives of women from below
- Lifting women out of obscurity into the mainstream of Namibian history
- Helping them gain recognition also in material terms
- Preserving the full story at trusted repository

# Ethical Issues

- Despite national reconciliation...
- Naming “puppets” and “informers”?
- No easy answers

# Conclusion

- Oral history is not told in one day, and not even in one month.
- Post-conflict research needs a setting that allows for the process of building trust and understanding, otherwise it will achieve nothing but scratch the surface.